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VOTIVE OFFERINGS AND THE WAR

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In ancient times many aspects of paganism were so deeply rooted in the life of the people that they could not be superseded by Christianity. The best that could be done was to endow them with a richer and fuller meaning. Among the outward manifestations of Greek and Roman religious belief was the custom of making *ἀναθήματα* and *donaria* to the gods to show gratitude for salvation from peril or the curing of afflictions. Frequent offerings were pictures of dangers avoided or models of parts of the body restored to health, accompanied by accounts of the event. The survival of this old custom is well known to travelers in classical lands. Popular shrines are likely to be adorned with wax or metal representations of limbs healed, with crutches discarded, or with pictures illustrating narrow escapes by land and sea. Votive ears, eyes, arms, legs, etc., are still in such demand that they are carried in stock by jewelers.

The great war which is upheaving old ideas and old ideals and causing an entire readjustment of modern life has not failed to exercise its influence upon the immemorial custom of making votive offerings. In the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine in Naples there is an imposing array, an impromptu museum, in fact, of *ex-voto* objects, such as bullets, bayonets, swords, water flasks, representations in silver of parts of the body and of fully equipped soldiers and sailors in miniature.¹ Nearly every offering is accompanied by a postcard photograph of a soldier saved by the intervention of the Madonna, and all of them have accounts of the miracle. The writers endeavored to do special honor to the occa-

¹ Helmets, cuirasses, shields, greaves, lances, javelins, swords, etc., were common military *ex-voto* offerings among the ancients. The best known of these objects is, perhaps, the bronze helmet which Hiero and the Syracusans dedicated at Olympia to commemorate their victory over the combined Etruscan and Carthaginian fleets off Cumae in 474 B.C. See W. Greenwell, "Votive Armour and Arms," *J.H.S.*, II, 65-82; Daremburg et Saglio, *s.v.*, *donaria*; Rouse, *Greek Votive Offerings*, pp. 95-148.

sion by forsaking the Neapolitan dialect and parading their best Tuscan, but the linguistic fatalities were in some instances appalling.

A soldier who presented the Austrian dagger that had menaced his life testified that he had been "miraculously saved in war through the protection of the Madonna del Carmine." An infantryman made a gift equally grim: "Finding himself at the front in the first line, he was attacked with this very bayonet the fourth or fifth of August on the hill Selz on the Carso, and through special favor of the Madonna was saved." An officer dedicated some of his clothes: "The lieutenant F.C., wounded in war and saved through the favor of the Madonna (while they were saying in this church a mass for his safety), has brought here his shirt pierced by the projectile."

The next soldier expressed himself crudely, but his meaning was perfectly patent. He presented a picture of himself and two of the objects to which he refers, the scapulary of the Madonna and the medallion: "R.C., 133d Reg., 8th Comp., the first of August had a bullet which pierced his pocket-book, burned the pictures in it, then pierced the scapulary of the Madonna, finally twisted a medal of Saint Anastasius, and barely grazed the skin of his stomach, remaining harmless. He brought these things with his own hands the 24th of August, 1915."

The dedication accompanying a small silver soldier with a bullet attached to his belt read as follows: "M.C., 31st Royal Infantry, 6th company brought this offering with the bullet which grazed his breast and fell to the ground without injuring him. He has said that it was a special favor of the Madonna del Carmine invoked by him with entire faith. 24, 2, 1916."

A mother who presented a photograph of her son and a miniature silver soldier poured out her thankfulness as follows: "Soldier M. of Carmine wounded on the mountain Sei Bassi the 25 July on the forehead and the right foot by splinters of grenades escaped [da *schegge di granate scampate*: note the syntax!] miraculously from certain death." A postscript informs us that "Angiolo M. has now been discharged from military service, going to work." In the next illustration the faulty spelling of the original is necessarily eliminated, but its style can be reproduced: "I ought to

have been struck with this bullet, but instead, calling upon the Virgin of Carmine, it stopped on my right shoulder without striking me in the Italy-Austria war in 1915.”¹

Τόξα τάδε πτολέμοιο πεπαυμένα δακρυούντος
νηφ' Αθηναίης κεῖται ὑπωρόφια
Πολλάκι δὴ στονούντα κατὰ κλόνον ἐν δαὶ φωτῶν
Περσῶν ἵππομάχων αἴματι λουσάμενα.

The next epigram (vi. 84) is almost thrilling:

Ζηνὶ τόδε ὁμφάλιον σάκεος τρύφος, φ' ἐπι λαιὰν
ἔσχεν ἀριστεύων, ἀνθετο Νικαγόρας.
πᾶν δὲ τὸ λοιπὸν ἀκοντες ἴσαριθμός τε χαλάζη
Χερμᾶς καὶ ἔιφέων ἐξεκόλαψε γένυς.
ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀμφιδρυπτον ἐὸν τόδε χειρὶ μεναίχμα
σώζετο Νικαγόρα, σώζε δὲ Νικαγόραν.
Θεσμὸν τὸν Σπάρτας μενεφύλοπιν ἀμφὶ βοείᾳ
τῆδε τις ἀθρήσει πάντα φυλασσόμενον.

More or less similar are epigrams 9, 52, 81, 85, 86, 91, 97, 123, 124, 141, 163, 264.

The most remarkable gift seen by the writer was a picture representing a battleship careening with its prow blown to pieces and a sailor swimming out of danger.² In a corner of it were two priests and the Madonna with the infant Jesus. A sailor's hat³

¹ Ancient dedications of arms and armor were most frequent after the soldier had retired from military life. They do not dwell upon details of hairbreadth escapes. The *Palatine Anthology* contains a number of interesting dedicatory epigrams. The following is by Simonides (vi. 2):

² In antiquity it was a common practice to consecrate pictures representing perils encountered upon the water. A friend asked Diagoras the Atheist when they reached Samothrace: “Tu, qui deos putas humana neglegere, nonne animadvertis ex tot tabulis pictis, quam multi votis vim tempestatis effugerint in portumque salvi pervenerint?” (Cic. *N.D.* iii. 37. 89).

³ The dedication of clothes is an old custom:

“Forte sacer Fauno foliis oleaster amaris
Hic steterat, nautis olim venerabile lignum,
Servati ex undis ubi figere dona solebant
Laurenti divo et votas suspendere vestes”

(Verg. *Aen.* xii. 766-69).

Compare also the figurative language of Horace (*Carm.* i. 5. 13-16):

“Me tabula sacer
Votiva paries indicat uvida
Suspensisse potentis
Vestimenta maris deo.”

The writer is informed that there is a stone ship under full sail in a cemetery outside of the city of Mexico.

and a miniature seaman in silver accompanied the picture. The dedication runs as follows: "L.P. has come to thank the Madonna for his having remained safe from the catastrophe of the Benedetto Brin through a real miracle, as he was picked up on the water after the explosion of 27, 9, 1915, hour 8:10. 20th Oct., 1915."¹

The writer saw these gifts in February of 1916. An entire room adjoining the apse was devoted to them. The objects aroused great interest, especially among the poor people of the district, who gazed at them in reverent awe.

The influence of the war upon the time-honored custom of making *donaria* to the gods is not confined to Italy. A visit to the cathedral of St. André at Bordeaux will reveal its effect in France. In June of last year there were to be seen at the base of the pedestal of the statue of Joan of Arc two large baskets filled with flowers and offerings of soldiers and of friends and relatives of soldiers. Individual and group photographs of *poilus* abounded. Almost all of them were decorated by a border of narrow ribbons in the national colors. On the front or back were written a few words breathing some soul's despair or hope.

Many of the supplicants had written with their hearts on their pens, and the occasional misspellings and the frequent omission of accents only heightened the pathos of the gifts. Several of the letters were unopened. One superscription read: "Je recommande a Jeanne d'Arc"; another, "Bienheureuse Jeanne d'Arc." Upon the back of a picture of a young man was written: "Bienheureuse Jeanne d'Arc Protegez mon neveu et filleul Louis. je vous en serez (sic) reconnaissance." Worked in letters like those of the "Home Sweet Home" mottoes that used to adorn the walls of our grandparents' homes was a little girl's simple but heart-rending prayer:

Bienheureuse Jeanne d'Arc,
Protegez mon papa L.S.

Three lines at the bottom of another picture contained a volume of anguish:

Bienheureuse Jeanne d'Arc,
Protegez mon fiancee [sic]
Une petite fiancee.

¹ The writer included a brief description of these offerings and dedications in a letter which was published last year in *Old Penn* (pp. 1103-5), the weekly journal of the University of Pennsylvania.

One of the longer supplications read: "Oh bienheureuse Jeanne Darc protegez mon cher mari A.D. Mettez fin le plutot possible à cette guerre que nous fait tant souffrir et rendez le moi sain et sauf comme avant son depart. Bienheureuse Jeanne d'Arc soyez pour la France protegez le mari et rendez le moi." The next entreaty breathes the spirit of France. The welfare of the country is put before that of kith and kin: "Bien heureuse ete veneree Jeanne D'Arc vous qui avez sauve deja une fois la France, sauve la encore une fois faites terminer cette abominable guerre Protegez mon cher mari Rendez le moi bientot sain et sauf."¹

The writer hoped to copy several more of these invocations, but so many women with tragedy written upon their faces were coming and kneeling before the statue that it seemed a sacrilege for one so carefree to disturb them.

There were striking differences in the character of the offerings of the Italians and French as well as in the manner in which they were made. At Naples the soldiers themselves for the most part presented grim reminders of perils and adventures in which they owed their safety to the intervention of the Madonna. At Bordeaux a large majority of the petitions to Joan of Arc were made by relatives and friends, and they invoked protection and a safe return for those still in danger. The French gave nothing that suggested the horrors of the battlefield.

Cabinets of *ex-voto* objects in the museums of Europe have a deeper meaning for the writer as a result of his sojourn abroad. Each one may represent some soul's yearning for help or thanksgiving for relief. Many things Greek and Roman become imbued with a richer and deeper significance when contact with life is widened, and votive offerings prove no exception when one sees what they mean to supplicants.

¹ A special effort was made by the writer to copy everything exactly as it was written.